

IVORY FIELDS

Under the Christmas Lights

Winter's Delight

... SIX ...



Under The Christmas Lights

Winter's Delight

Book 6

Ivory Fields



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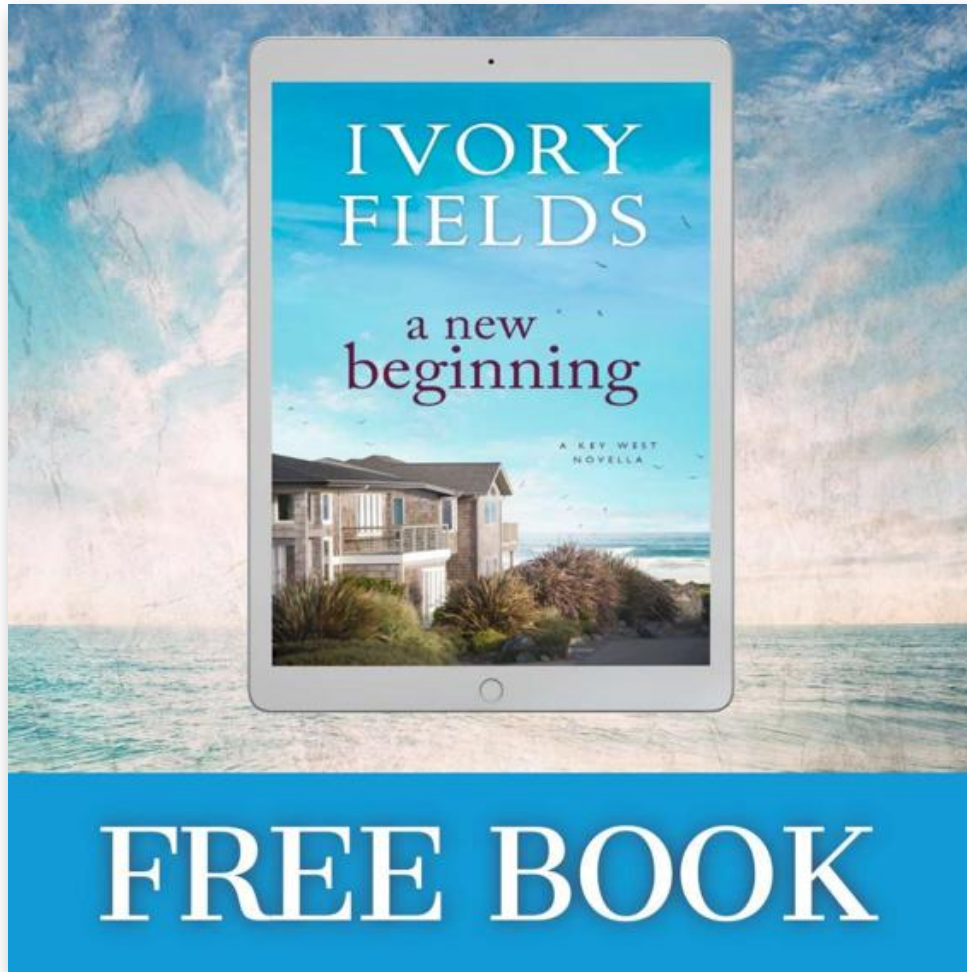
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Chapter One



“No, I’m wide awake,” Frieda Strauss said into the phone as she scurried out of her covers. It was true.

It was nearly eleven, but she was still wide awake, sitting among her pillows and wrapped in blankets, reading one of her guilty pleasure romance novels. She loved the cheesy smut books but practically flung it away from her when her phone began to ring, and she saw Erik’s name flash across the screen.

“Good,” Erik said on the other end of the line. “Wendy’s heading through town to get to her place and she’s going to be going right by you in five minutes or less. I need you to go down and wait in your truck until she goes by, then follow her home. But don’t pull out right away because she thinks she has a tail with no lights. Don’t turn your lights on, and try to see if you catch who it is.”

“Done,” Frieda replied curtly, pulling on her sneakers. She was already wearing a long-sleeved flannel shirt and similar bottoms, so she didn’t bother to change. Instead, she reached directly for her keys, and left her townhouse as is.

The frigid December air blasted her harshly as she opened her front door, and she snagged her coat off of her hook as she went outside. Frieda shivered involuntarily as she hit the unlock button on her key fob and all but threw herself into the cab of her black Dodge pickup truck. Shoving her key into the ignition, she turned it on and blasted the heat.

As she buckled her seat belt and warmth began to fill the cab, Frieda spotted a pair of headlights in her rearview mirror.

She immediately put her truck into drive, and waited in anticipation for the car to pass. Just as she'd thought would, Frieda spotted the familiarities of Wendy's vehicle, and her heart leapt with anticipation. Then, just as Erik had warned her, she saw the outline of a car following approximately 100 feet behind, its headlights out.

Stealthily, Frieda pulled her truck onto the road, careful not to spin her wheels on the ice and snow that had drifted around her tires. It was difficult to make out any distinctions, especially without her lights on, but Frieda did catch bits of the license plate at times. F something-something-357-something V1- something-something. She was so intent on trying to make the rest out, she almost didn't realize that they were all slowing down, and that they'd made a turn onto Wendy's street. As she pulled her truck into park a safe distance away from the other vehicle, her phone rang again. It was Erik.

"I see you," he said immediately. "Stay in your truck until I give the clear."

"Are we going to approach them?" she asked, looking down at the baton she always kept in the door of her truck. With the appropriate strength, it could snap a bone like it was a dried-out twig.

"Only if absolutely necessary," Erik replied. "If they get out and try to follow her inside, yes. If he stays in his vehicle and drives off, we leave him be. We don't want to reveal ourselves unless we have to."

Frieda grunted in disappointment, almost wishing the perp would.

"Do we have any idea who it might be?" she asked.

"Wendy thinks it's Jimmy," Erik explained. "She said he was acting very creepy at the party."

"He was there?" Frieda asked, floored at this. Then mumbled, "Bastard."

"Agreed, and I was as surprised as you were," Erik replied. "Maybe there's some sort of ménage à trois going on or

something. Either way, we'll find out more when we go inside to talk with Wendy and make sure she's okay."

Their conversation ended quickly, and Frieda leaned forward and waited. She was torn. Even if it wasn't Jimmy, she wanted an excuse to do some real harm to whoever was messing with her family. The three of them had worked so hard to get *The Mystic Refuge* to become exactly what they wanted, and she would be damned if she was going to let someone destroy that.

On the other hand, though, she didn't want Wendy in any danger. She was doing them all a huge favor by helping them catch the people who were terrorizing them. Wendy was innocent in all of this and had no reason to get involved, but yet here she was, helping them.

Last year, the Christmas Contests had gone so well, Frieda thought back, her mind drifting off to their troubles. It had been so much fun and almost easy to win all of the contests. But this year...this year, the contests only brought them trouble. They'd been broken into, sabotaged, had a wild animal unleashed upon them, been set on fire, and vandalized on epic proportions: first the window painting, and then, the hot spring pools that were normally their biggest amenity.

They were going to cost thousands to repair, and at a time when customers used them the most. Already customers were cancelling their stays early and letting their unhappiness be known. The police had been no help. So now here she and her sisters Birgit and Heidi were getting help from their own rag-tag team of friends and trying their best to find the perpetrators and make the harassment stop.

Frieda's focus came back to the present as she heard a car door open and watched as Wendy walked into her home. She waited awhile, her eyes darting back to the car she'd followed to the door. Minutes ticked by, and her body started to tense and curl up as if it were getting ready to strike. But then, instead of getting out of their car, the driver turned the car on and drove off once again with his headlights off.

Frieda let out the breath she'd been holding as her phone chirped. *Let's head in*, the message from Erik stated. Even though she was parked out front, Frieda knew that they all had to use the door facing Wendy's backyard just in case. She met Erik at the back gate, and they could both see Wendy waiting for them on the back porch.

"Are you okay?" Erik asked, his voice full of concern as he opened his arms.

"I'm fine," Wendy promised, accepting his hug with as much enthusiasm.

Frieda felt a sense of longing as she watched the intimate exchange, and turned her eyes to the ground to give them privacy. Erik and Wendy hadn't been an item for very long, but it was very clear how much they were drawn together.

"Frieda, thank you so much for coming," Wendy said, going from Erik to Frieda. The two women exchanged a brief hug before Wendy urged them inside.

"Anytime," Frieda replied, thankful when the warmth of Wendy's house greeted her. "I'm sorry I couldn't do more. I didn't get a look at the driver, and I only caught some of his license plate."

"That's okay," Wendy assured her. "I'm almost certain it was Jimmy anyway. I'm just glad that someone was there to have my back. It was super creepy when I looked back and saw the headlights going out. I freaked me out a little."

"You did the right thing," Erik assured her quickly, putting a comforting hand on her back. "There's no ethical reason that anyone would do that. Now what happened? How did we end up here?"

"I'll make us some coffee while I tell you," Wendy offered.

"No, you sit," Frieda insisted. "I'll make it. You just tell us what happened."

Wendy gave her a grateful smile, and sat down as she began to talk. While Frieda made them coffee, serving it up with a healthy dollop of Irish cream, Wendy explained what

happened at Anita's party. She explained how Frank seemed to try to warn her to stay away, and how Jimmy suddenly appeared, surprising her, and somehow able to dismiss Frank as if he were working for him.

"Poor Frank," Frieda murmured, wondering what the poor man was trapped into.

"Something crooked is definitely underway," Wendy stated, wrapping her hands around her warm coffee cup. She picked it up and took a long sip, her shoulders finally relaxing as the liquor warmed her belly.

"This was a great idea," Wendy told Frieda, smiling, "thank you."

"Just let me know when you need a refill," Frieda replied quickly, giving her a wink.

"So what now?"

Before Wendy could answer, her cell phone began to ring, and her face paled.

"It's Anita," she sighed dismally.

"Answer, but sound sick," Erik advised quickly. "Apologize and accept any invitation she gives you. We can still do this."

Wendy's meek look disappeared, and she nodded her head resolutely. "Yes, we can."

She took a deep breath, then answered, her voice perfectly mimicking a person with stomach issues.

"Hello? Yes, yes, so sorry. No, I'm fine. No, he didn't upset me at all. No, yeah, he just took me to the side because I started feeling sick. Oh, really? I had no idea about that. Yes, well, he took me off guard. Yes, I'm sure. Tomorrow sounds great. Thanks again. You too. Bye."

Wendy hung up the phone, and let out a deep breath. "I think I'll take the second cup now," she said to Frieda. "Hold the coffee."

“You got it,” Frieda replied, already getting up. “What did she say?”

“I think she bought it, but she was super worried about what Frank said to me and wanted to make sure he didn’t do anything to upset me. She mentioned Jimmy, too. Apparently, he was supposed to wait to talk to me until after Anita explained their relationship. They’re partners in a development project. She apologized for him surprising me.”

“So, she didn’t mention him following you?” Erik asked.

Wendy shook her head as she accepted her mug back from Frieda.

“No, but I bet she’s the reason he did. I didn’t want to mention it to her either.”

“Good thinking,” Erik assured her. “We need to get someone on Jimmy. He’s a loose screw in this, I’m sure of it. All he needs is just the right twist and he’ll fall right out.”

“I like the sound of that,” Frieda smirked. “Who do we get?”

“I bet Regan will do it,” Erik offered.

“Who?” Frieda and Wendy asked in unison.

“Regan,” Erik repeated. “He’s my buddy who helped with the phone. He has a little experience in this stuff, and he’ll be a fresh face.”

“Another secret agent friend of yours?” Frieda asked, her eyebrow drawing up. “How many of you are hiding out in these mountains?”

“More than you think,” Erik answered. By his tone, Frieda couldn’t tell if he was joking or serious, and decided she didn’t want to know.

“I’ll give him a call tonight as soon as I get home,” Erik continued. “Free, do you mind staying here with Wendy for the night?”

“Of course, I will,” Frieda replied, turning to Wendy with a comforting smile.

“I’ll make us a great breakfast in the morning.”

“Thank you, Frieda,” Wendy replied graciously. “I don’t think I can sleep. The being followed thing really freaked me out.”

“Of course, it did,” Frieda replied. “This is all uncalled for, and I want nothing more than to shove my foot in that sorry excuse for a man’s rear for doing this. It’s bad enough he’s in cahoots with whatever Anita is trying to pull, but to follow you home after a party?”

She shook her head in disgust, wishing bodily harm to her former brother-in-law.

“I can stay, too,” Erik offered, “I just need to run home and grab some things.”

“That’s okay,” Wendy soothed, giving his hand a warm squeeze. “I know you’ve got some work planned. Frieda has my back, don’t you, Frieda?”

Frieda nodded readily, throwing her arm over Wendy’s shoulder.

“You bet I do,” she replied. “We gals gotta stick together.”

Chapter Two



“I thought we were done with field work,” Regan grumbled, standing next to Erik. It was five a.m. and they were both approaching the back door to Wendy’s house. Regan was, to put it nicely, uncomfortable with the idea of returning to a formal life.

“This is an exception,” Erik explained, rolling his eyes as he stood by his friend. “We’re so close to catching these people. You might be the piece we’ve been missing to all this stuff to stop. Besides, I thought you liked being a good guy?”

Regan rolled his bright green eyes and let them land on Erik.

“You had to go there, didn’t you?” he asked dully.

Erik chuckled as he knocked on Wendy’s back door.

“A good coach knows how to get every player in the game,” he retorted.

The back door opened, and Frieda appeared, giving Erik a quick smile before turning a suspicious eye toward Regan. Despite his grumpiness, Regan felt a stir of amusement as he saw the woman. She reminded him of a woman he’d met in Belarus who was running an underground hospital: middle-aged, strong, attractive features, and a general air of “down with the patriarchy.” Regan liked her immediately.

“Well, get in here,” Frieda stated, rolling her eyes. “You’re going to let all the cold in.”

“Frieda, this is my friend Regan I was telling you about,” Erik explained as the two of them walked inside. “Regan, this is Frieda. She’s one of the Strauss sisters.”

“Is Erik here?” Another woman’s voice called from further inside the house.

“Yep, it’s him,” Frieda shouted back, giving Erik a look. Then in a quieter voice to him, she said, “Why don’t you go in and find her?”

Regan watched as his once stoic friend made a worried face and immediately asked Frieda how the night went.

“It was rough,” Frieda confessed with a sigh, crossing her arms. “Neither of us got much sleep, and she kept looking out the window to see if the car came back.”

“I should have stayed.” Erik groaned, already going further into the house to look for Wendy. A moment later Regan and Frieda both heard sounds of hugging and whispered words, and as if in unison, rolled their eyes at the same time.

“I thought you military guys were supposed to be all hard and unfeeling?” Frieda asked, catching Regan rolling his eyes.

“We are,” Regan agreed, his tone hard. “He’s malfunctioning. That’s why he got kicked out.”

Frieda’s eyes grew big as she asked in a whispered voice, “What?”

Regan broke his facade then, chuckling as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Kidding,” he promised her, giving her an apologetic smile. To this, Frieda clicked her tongue and swatted him on the arm. Regan only laughed harder at her response and shook his head.

“In all seriousness, though, Erik used to never be that way,” Regan went on. “Used to be one of the hardest guys I know. Now look at him! Practically speaking baby talk.”

“It is *not* baby talk,” Erik stated, returning to the mud room with an eyebrow raised at Regan. “And I’d keep my mouth

shut unless you want these lovely ladies to know you were willing to risk it all on a—”

“No need to finish that sentence,” Regan stated, cutting Erik off. His eyes turned to Frieda, who was smirking at him in amusement. “He’s an evil man.”

“I can see that.” Frieda chuckled.

“Enough playing,” Erik urged, nodding for them to come further into the house. “Come on. We’ve got no time to lose and we’ve got to talk strategy.”

Frieda and Regan shared a quick glance before they both moved themselves into the kitchen where they found Wendy waiting for them.

“Regan, this is Wendy; Wendy, this is Regan,” Erik introduced.

“Our spy,” Regan reaffirmed as he shook his head. Wendy laughed weakly and nodded.

“Supposedly,” she replied, sounding tired.

Regan took a moment to take her in, noting all of her signs of fatigue. Everyone always thinks it’s fun to be a spy, but the truth is it could take a toll on both the mind and the body. And it could do it fast.

“This is a very nice thing you’re doing for your friends,” he continued, his eyes glancing up at Frieda.

“Well, they deserve it,” Wendy replied, sounding a little stronger after she sipped her coffee.

“The Strauss sisters have done nothing wrong, but they’ve gone through some horrible stuff. It’s time to get it to stop.”

Regan nodded. Erik had filled him on the damage, and it had sounded like sabotage at its finest.

“Then let’s do that,” he agreed, taking a seat at the table.

“We’ve come up with a new plan,” Erik explained, following him. He looked toward Frieda, who was walking to the table with a fresh carafe of coffee.

“Frieda, do you still want to help us? Regan came up with a pretty good idea.”

Regan bit back a smirk as Frieda suddenly nodded vehemently as she sat down.

“Absolutely,” she agreed. “I’m tired of sitting all of this stuff out. Put me in coach!”

Again, Regan felt a smile itch at his lips.

“How come you didn’t join the forces?” he asked her as he reached for the coffee. “We could have used your enthusiasm many times.”

“Well, I’m here now, cowboy,” Frieda said dryly, reaching to take the coffee carafe away from him and turning her attention to Erik. “So, what’s my new role? Do I try to become friends with Anita, too? Ooo, or with Jimmy? Ugh, that would be hard, though. I would probably end up punching him and blowing my cover. Maybe Frank then? Whatever it is, I’ll do it.”

Regan and Erik exchanged an amused look, and then both of them grinned.

* * *

“I can’t believe this,” Frieda grumbled as she let Wendy help her put makeup on. “I haven’t gone out with a guy in years, and I *still* have to go through a breakup.”

Wendy stopped blending in Frieda’s foundation and looked down at her with a cocked brow.

“Would you prefer to switch places?” she offered. “You can be Anita’s new best friend, and I’ll happily be Regan’s supposed ex.”

“Fair point,” Frieda grumbled, knowing she wouldn’t be able to pull off such a thing.

The plan was good, she thought. She and Regan, who most people in Leavenworth didn’t know, would break up publicly. Wendy would spread the word to Anita that Regan was not

only affluent but now against the Strauss sisters and hopefully draw in Jimmy, essentially trapping him into a confession.

“Walk me through the plan again,” Frieda asked as Wendy put on the finishing touches to her face.

“Anita wants to meet at *Sarabel’s* for lunch,” Wendy explained. “You and Regan are going to go in about ten minutes early and act like you’re on a date. You’ll wait ten to fifteen minutes after Anita and I arrive and you’ll have your big, dramatic breakup scene. Anita will immediately notice because, well, she’s Anita, and I’ll be there to quickly fill in the details. Then we wait and see if Regan is contacted by Jimmy.”

“Then you and Regan work your magic to get them to confess, and we end this fiasco,” Frieda stated.

“Exactly,” Wendy agreed, turning Frieda’s chair toward the mirror. “And you’re done.”

As Frieda saw her reflection in the mirror, she gasped. She’d never worn so much makeup or dressed in such a way all of her life. Wendy had curled Frieda’s short, black hair and added some smoky eyes to her brown eyes and rouge to her otherwise pale cheeks. Wendy had dressed her in a long-sleeved, fitted dark red dress that rode several inches above her knees, making her legs seem pale and awkward.

“I don’t look like me at all,” Frieda stated, still shocked at her reflection. “How is this supposed to help with the plan?”

Wendy sighed, and smiled at her sweetly.

“Because we want you to appear like you’ve really fallen for this guy. Everyone knows you’re a “take it or leave it” kind of girl. This is a signal that you’ve changed all that.”

“Again, how is that important to the plan?” Frieda asked.

“Trust me,” Wendy stated, pulling out a pair of heels for Frieda to wear. “It will be.”

“Whatever you say, boss.” Frieda sighed, strapping the tiny death traps to her feet. How was she to walk in the snow in these things? She’d spent over forty years not wearing heels,

and now here she was, in the tallest ones imaginable. She went to take a step forward and stumbled, only missing the ground because of Wendy's quick reflexes.

"Come on," Wendy urged, "I'll help you. Before we leave, go out to the living room and walk around a bit. It'll get easier."

"Oh my gosh, look at this," Erik teased as he and Regan saw Wendy and Frieda come down the stairs. "I need a picture of this. Your sisters won't believe me without proof."

"You snap that picture, and I'll snap your femur," Frieda warned him, still struggling in her heels as they made it to the landing.

"Wow," Regan stated, looking her up and down, as if shocked.

"Listen, buddy, I'll snap your femur, too, if you got any jokes," she threatened, turning to him.

"Not at all," Regan replied, shaking his head. "I'm just wondering how I'm supposed to break up with you looking like that. Even if it is just pretend."

"Well, of course, you'll go mad with loneliness," Frieda teased, finally taking another look at him.

"Well, if I'm leaving you, I deserve it," Regan teased back.

He and Erik had just returned from Erik's place, where he had put Regan in one of his better suits. *Sarabel's* was one of the more upscale restaurants in the place, and they both needed to look the part. Frieda realized she preferred him in just his jeans and sweater, but she had to admit that he could certainly pull off a suit as well.

"You look good, too," she admitted, smoothing her hands down her dress stressfully. "At least we'll look the part."

For the first time since meeting him, Regan smiled at Frieda.

"Oh, we'll do more than that, sweetheart," he assured. "Just stick with me. We're about to put on the best

performance of our lives. People who don't even know us will mourn the end of our relationship.”

Chapter Three



Birgit stared down at her phone, frowning. She'd been kept in the loop about Wendy's performance the night before and how the plans had changed and now involved Frieda. She had faith in her little sister, and she knew that she would be successful. But, selfishly, Birgit wanted her by her side.

Christmas was now only a few days away, with only one contest left to go. Nothing had occurred during the last one they had participated in, but that didn't make Birgit feel any better. Instead, it actually stressed her out even more. It was as if she was just waiting for something awful to happen, which was very much against her nature. She and her sisters were go-getters, and playing the game of wait-and-see had been difficult for all three of them.

"What's the news?" Heidi asked, appearing by Birgit's side in the lobby of *The Mystic Refuge*.

"There were some complications with Wendy last night," Birgit explained. "Frieda's now going to be a part of the trap Erik, Tucker, and the guys are setting up for Anita and Jimmy."

Heidi made a face, her blonde brows rising up in surprise.

"Are you sure that's wise?" she asked. "I love Frieda, but she's..."

"Tightly wound?" Birgit offered, both of them trying to speak delicately about their dearly loved middle sister. Heidi gave her an appreciative look and nodded.

“She’s not really one to play cool when issues arrive,” Heidi agreed.

“No,” Birgit sighed, “she’s not. But Erik has faith this plan will work, and I have faith in Frieda’s strong will. So, I think what we should do is start putting our final plans into motion for this last contest, and take care of things on our end.”

“Right,” Heidi agreed, choosing to think optimistically. This chaos had to come to an end. Surely. “So, the last contest of the year. The Christmas pageant. Do you still have the dress?”

The Christmas pageant was not only the wrap-up of the month-long themed contests but also the wrap-up of the year. Business representatives from the town and the state of Washington had to listen to each contestant’s story as to how the year affected them and the creative ways they worked toward positive solutions. For this contest, the winner would not only get an award from the town but also from Washington as well.

“I do, I checked this morning,” Birgit agreed, giving a curt nod. “They may have figured a way into the hotel at times, but I was able to keep them out of my quarters. Tucker went through my computer and place last night and found no trace of any intruders. So, at least we have one secure place.”

“Good,” Heidi replied, nodding. “I’ve got Cynthia coming in to take your place at the front desk for today, and Lorrie’s agreed to work a double. You need all the time you can get to practice your speech.”

Birgit winced, and shook her head.

“Don’t do that to Lorrie; she’s already done so much for us. Giving her a double shift isn’t exactly saying thank you.”

Heidi laughed softly. “Who do you think suggested it?” she asked. “You know Cynthia and Lorrie *love* working together.”

She paused, her smile dropping a little. “Besides, a good portion of our guests left once we announced the shutdown of the hot springs. They’ll both get a lot of time to relax. I even

told them Tucker and Pierce could come in and hang in the lobby.”

Birgit bit her bottom lip and nodded. It was a harsh fact, but it wasn't a surprise. Their hot springs were their biggest draw, and now they were ruined. They had been able to stave off most cancellations before then despite their many strange problems, but once they closed off the pools, people started leaving in droves. The only positive to come of it all was that only a handful of their guests requested a refund. Otherwise, they would have been in huge trouble.

“Okay,” Birgit agreed, pushing the intrusive thought away from her. “You're right. I need to practice my speech. I think I'm going to see if Chris is free to come over. It might help me to start practicing aloud to an actual person.”

“I think that's a great idea,” Heidi agreed.

“I just want this all to be over,” Birgit sighed, hugging her youngest sister.

“Me too,” Heidi agreed, squeezing her tightly back. “And it will be. If there's one thing about Frieda, it's that she's determined. Whatever she has to do to pull this thing off, we both know she'll do it.”

“That's true.” Birgit laughed softly, pulling away. “So we've got this?”

Heidi smiled as she nodded affirmatively back at her sister. “We've got this.”

* * *

“**Y**ou deserve a Grammy,” Regan praised, his green eyes bright with triumph.

“You weren't so bad yourself.” Frieda laughed, feeling her cheeks grow warm. “Even I have to admit that that was quite a performance for us. Not bad for our first time.”

“Not bad at all,” Regan agreed. “And Erik and I had a hunch Jimmy would be there. He's growing more paranoid, so

he's going to grab for more control.”

It might have been predictable to Regan, but it had really thrown Frieda off when she spotted Jimmy blending in among the many men seated at the restaurant's bar. She almost hadn't spotted him because he'd been so well disguised, but when Regan pointed him out to her, she knew right away it was him.

It had startled her so much that she thought it was going to ruin her performance, but instead, it only made her better. Regan and her imaginary breakup had gone beautifully. She finally had a place and reason to project some of her pent-up feelings toward men, and it had felt *really* good. It also gave Regan a solid platform to act as the heartbroken, bitter, rich boy toy who just got dumped. The scene had Anita and Jimmy both playing right into their hands.

As soon as Frieda had stormed off, Jimmy came over to introduce himself to Regan and Anita immediately began to ask Wendy for details. Wendy, who'd strengthened her constitution, had played her part perfectly and gave Anita all of the details Erik and Regan had rehearsed with her.

Just like they had planned, Frieda had stormed off and pretended to leave but had gone around the block to wait for Regan in one of the town's many small coffee shops where they'd parked the car. Inside, she quickly changed back into her regular clothes and scrubbed the makeup off her face. It was a nice look, but it wasn't her.

Now, they would all reconvene at Davis' place since it was still daytime. So far, Wendy had not only been able to text them some details about her and Anita's conversation, but also wrote that there was much more to share. For the time being, she was still with Anita and would join them later.

“So, give me the details,” Frieda urged as Regan pulled his black Jeep Gladiator onto the road.

“Like I said, you deserve a Grammy.” Regan laughed. “Jimmy practically leaped into your seat the moment you left and started talking about the heartache of losing a Strauss sister. He immediately tried to play into my emotional side.”

“I would have loved to see that.” Frieda laughed.

Regan smirked at her.

“I think you’d be surprised how emotional I can pretend to be,” he teased. “I can actually play the broken boyfriend pretty well.”

“Because of your job?” Frieda asked.

“Because of my experience,” Regan admitted, turning to her with a “but what do you do?” shrug.

Frieda grimaced, knowing the feeling all too well.

“That sucks,” she replied, “I’m sorry.”

Regan laughed. “Don’t be. It made today’s performance very easy. Plus, I’m not a live-in-the-past kind of guy. I look at those breakups as more of lessons than mistakes.”

“A good perspective,” Frieda acknowledged.

“I think so, too,” Regan agreed, “but back to the story.”

“Yes, back to the story,” Frieda encouraged, happy to be moving on from the sensitive subject of breakups.

“When he decided my heartbreak for you was real, he went in for the kill,” Regan continued, getting to the meat of the story. “He told me about this real estate venture he and his partner are involved in and how it would not only double my profit but also exact revenge on you.”

“Oh my God,” Frieda breathed, not believing that it could have been that easy. “Oh my God, we’ve got them!”

Regan shook his head as he got off the exit toward Davis’ house and began taking smaller, less cared-for roads up into the mountains.

“Not yet. We’ve got to get him and Anita talking about it *together*. Jimmy and I exchanged phone numbers. He said he was going to set up a meeting for Friday for me with his business partner and his financial team. He said he’ll call to confirm the details later. Hopefully, Anita will be there, and we can get this all done with.”

“Friday,” Frieda echoed. “That’s the night of the last Christmas contest. That’s tomorrow!”

Regan nodded.

“Which means if they’re going to try to pull anything that night, they might ask Wendy and me to help them. If they do, we can sabotage and reveal them in front of everyone.”

Frieda’s stomach suddenly churned with excitement. She had been nervous to do this at first, but now she felt triumphant. The harassment she and her sisters had been put through was finally going to be over for good, and it was because of her help.

“You know,” Regan said after Frieda didn’t respond, “as far as civilian problems go, this is pretty intense stuff. I’ve gotta say from what Erik has told me, you and your sisters have been handling this very well.”

Frieda shrugged. “Well, what else are we going to do? We weren’t raised to run away from a challenge or a threat.”

Regan chuckled and shook his head.

“I was trying to give you a compliment, Frieda,” he explained.

Frieda felt her cheeks grow warm, and she glanced down at her lap.

“Oh. Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Regan replied with a relaxed smile. “I just wanted you to know.”

Frieda felt an old but familiar flutter in her stomach, and she let her guard down a little bit.

“So, what made you want to retire to Leavenworth? I know almost everyone here and know you’re not from here.”

“No, ma’am, I’m not,” Regan agreed. “I was born and raised in Los Angeles. I retired here because I made some lifelong friends like Tucker and Erik and wanted to be close to someone familiar. Plus, I like Washington. Especially these

mountains. It's easy to get to people if you want company, but it's even easier to self-isolate when necessary."

"And I assume you isolate more than associate?" Frieda asked. Regan nodded.

"Yes, ma'am, you assume correctly," he replied matter-of-factly.

"Me too," Frieda admitted. "Even though I live in a row of townhouses, I don't talk to or know any of my neighbors. I prefer my space and don't need anyone feeling comfortable knocking at my door at random times."

"Have you ever thought about getting a place outside of town?" Regan asked as he pulled onto the last road toward Davis' house.

"Well, before all this happened, I was planning on having enough to buy a plot and build my own within the next four years," Frieda explained, "but after losing so much money because of these damned tricks, I just don't know. It'll definitely take me longer."

"Don't lose hope just yet," Regan told her as he pulled into Davis' driveway. "You never know what next year has in store."

Frieda was about to sarcastically ask him where he found his optimism when the front door of the small, one-floor cabin opened and Davis stepped out, smiling and holding a mug in his hand.

"Help me out here," Regan requested, looking to Frieda with a grin, "which one is he dating again? Erik kinda gave me the rundown on who's with whom, but it was a little confusing. And maybe a tad nauseating."

Frieda chuckled. "I know what you mean. Davis is dating my youngest sister, Heidi. Davis' younger brother, Tucker, is dating Cynthia. Tucker's friend Pierce is dating Lorrie, who is Cynthia's best friend. Both of them work for us at the hotel. Then there's Birgit and Chris. Chris just sold his last liquor store and is not retiring. He's kind of the odd one out in that he's not really connected with the other guys."

“And now I guess you can also add Erik and Wendy to the list of couples,” Regan noted, smirking.

“It’s new,” Frieda stated, “but yeah, I definitely think something is going on between the two of them.”

“I wonder what that means for us,” Regan asked, giving her a look that made her laugh.

“What are you talking about?” she laughed.

“I’m just saying there seems to be a pattern here,” Regan teased.

“Well, we just broke up,” Frieda joked back.

A look of feign hurt came over Regan’s face, and he put his hand on his heart.

“That’s right. You’ve already ruined me.”

He then shrugged and reached for the door.

“Well, what do you do? Still friends?”

Frieda laughed as she pushed at him, then opened her own door.

“Sure,” she giggled, “why not?”

Chapter Four



“Anita *completely* forgot about my little faux pas at her party as soon as you two caused the scene,” Wendy explained. It was almost three hours later. Frieda and Regan were beginning to worry that something had gone awry when Erik’s truck finally pulled into Davis’ driveway. They had bags of take-out food with them, and Wendy had begun her report as soon as they’d all sat down.

“Seriously?” Frieda asked, though she wasn’t surprised. Anita was an incredibly fickle woman.

“She stopped mid-sentence when you stood up and started shouting and never went back to the topic,” Wendy explained, giving off an accomplished smile. “Didn’t speak a word during the whole scene. Then, afterward, she had a lot of questions about you. After that, she moved on to financial stuff and resumed her push for a Friday meeting with Jansen Marks.

“That’s the name of the guy Jimmy wants me to meet on Friday,” Regan piped up, pointing his chopsticks at Wendy.

“Our appointment is at two in the afternoon,” said Wendy. “When are you meeting with him?”

“Jimmy hasn’t gotten back to me yet, but I’ll bet the farm it’ll be at two,” Regan replied.

“That’s a pretty safe bet,” Wendy agreed. “When she wasn’t asking about your imaginary relationship, she was doing her best to praise Jimmy.”

Wendy paused, rolling her eyes. “Anita swears up and down that he was the best mayor our town ever had and that he

was *so* intelligent. She went on and on about how he was misunderstood by so many, including his ex-wife.”

“My sister,” Frieda stated flatly, feeling her temper spike.

Wendy frowned and nodded.

“Unfortunately, a little degradation of your sister’s name did occur,” she admitted, her tone apologetic, “but it was revealing. Keep in mind Anita was drinking this entire time and was on her fourth martini by the time Birgit came up. She started bragging about herself being an ‘alpha woman’ and confessed to being in a relationship with two men. She didn’t come out and say it exactly, but she laid the dots out pretty easy for me to connect. It’s clear the other guy is Jimmy.”

“What about poor Frank?” Frieda asked. “How does he feel about this?”

Wendy gave her a pleading look.

“I *so* wanted to ask, but I didn’t want to risk her paranoia if I revealed I was worried for him. I just told her that was a pretty intense power move and then she insisted we do shots.”

“How mature,” Regan murmured, looking unamused.

“She’s like a frat boy,” Frieda added, shaking her head in disgust. “Oh, Frank. You deserved much better.”

“Well, maybe once we end this thing, he’ll be able to be free to find much better,” Davis pointed out.

“That is if he doesn’t go to jail for being an accomplice,” Erik countered, “and that’s another thing. We’re a little farther away from our end goal than you might realize. Even if we have proof they want to take over the Strauss property together, we still need them to admit to their other crimes. The fire, the paint, the bear. They have to admit it all, and we have to have proof of that admission.”

Frieda winced. She’d been so focused on the spying part of the equation and finally able to do something to help that she’d forgotten about that part. That was going to be the hardest and most important part to ending all of this chaos.

“So, what do we do now?” she asked, putting down her takeout box of lo mein, no longer hungry.

“Now we wait until Jimmy gives me a call and confirms the time of the meeting,” Regan replied. “Where is this contest being held tomorrow night?”

“At the Chamber of Commerce building at six,” Frieda explained. He nodded.

“Okay. They still might try to pull another trick, so we’ll have Tucker, Pierce, and Davis stand guard at the hotel. The rest of us will go to the contest and do what we can to try to intercept anything that might seem wrong.”

“My sister is speaking at the ceremony tomorrow,” Frieda stated, feeling her heart squeeze. “I don’t want her to be a target.”

Regan gave her a protective look and nodded in understanding.

“We’ll make sure nothing happens to her. To anyone. We’re going to get ahead of this and stop it.”

Frieda was not an emotional woman for the most part, but the tone of Regan’s voice and the look in his eyes made her want to lean against him and finally let herself feel all of the stress she’d been secretly storing in a dark corner of her subconscious. She was tired, and she so much wanted to rest. Regan made her feel like that was possible.

“Good,” Frieda agreed, standing up. “I need to get to the hotel and let my sisters know what’s happening. It’s better that I tell them in person.”

“I’ll give you a ride,” Regan quickly offered, standing up next.

“We could all go to the hotel,” Wendy offered.

“Not yet,” Frieda replied, giving her an apologetic smile. “We’ve got to keep up appearances until this is all over. We’re so close to ending this. I don’t want to lose because we got sloppy.”

“I have to agree,” Erik added, placing his hand over Wendy’s. “Come on, I’ll get you home.”

“I don’t want to go back there yet.” Wendy sighed, her shoulders drooping. “I feel like I’m going to see Jimmy every time I look out my window.”

“You can stay here a few more hours,” Davis offered, getting up. “I, on the other hand, am allowed to visit the hotel, so I want to pop in and see Heidi. You’ll have the place to yourselves.”

Frieda caught the look of relief Wendy and Erik both seemed to share, and bit back a smirk. The two were gaga already. Ugh. As she shook her head, she caught sight of Regan doing the same thing, and almost chuckled out loud.

“Are you sure that would be okay?” Erik asked Davis, his eyes flickering from him to Wendy. Davis nodded as he walked by and clapped Erik on the back.

“Of course, man,” Davis replied. “Just lock up if you decide to leave before I get back.”

“Cute, aren’t they?” Regan whispered by Frieda’s side as they made their way outside.

“Downright adorable,” Frieda murmured back, rolling her eyes. “Come on, let’s get to my sisters. We need to fill them in.”

* * *

“**Y**ou did *what?!*” Birgit exclaimed.

Frieda winced and then held her finger up to her lips.

“Shhh! We’re in the lobby!” she whispered back, her eyes quickly darting around.

“Oh, there’s no one here.” Birgit sighed, shaking her head. “Frieda, seriously, why would you do that? You could have gotten hurt! We already know these people are crazy and paranoid. What if they would have suspected you?”

“But they didn’t,” Regan chimed in, his tone calm but protective.

“Frieda gave an amazing performance and it turned out very well,” he continued. “Jimmy called me back on the ride in, and we’re meeting this Jansen guy at two tomorrow along with Wendy and Anita. The plan worked, Birgit, and now we have insider perspectives for what’s going to happen next.”

“B, calm down,” Heidi urged gently, placing her hands on her oldest sister’s shoulders. “Free is okay, aren’t you, Free?”

“Yes, I am,” Frieda replied, nodding vigorously as she took one of Birgit’s hands.

“And this lovely gentleman—I’m sorry what was your name again?” Heidi continued.

“Regan,” Regan replied with a curt nod to both of them.

“Regan,” Heidi continued, “was there to watch over her. You weren’t going to let anything happen to her, were you?”

Frieda glanced over at Regan as he solemnly shook his head no. “No, ma’am,” he swore.

“Okay then, so we have nothing to be upset about,” Heidi went on. “Come on, B, let’s try to focus on what we have to do next.”

Birgit took in a deep breath as she closed her eyes and then let out a slow exhale. Then, with lightning quick reflexes, she reached out toward her sisters and brought them to her in a crushing hug. A collective “oomph” escaped the trio of tightly banded women, almost making Regan smile.

“I just don’t want anything to happen to the two of you,” Birgit explained, holding them both close. “And I want this to be over.”

“It will be, and soon,” Frieda assured her, delicately untangling herself from Birgit’s tight grasp. “We have a plan.”

“One that doesn’t involve using your sister as a spy,” Regan added.

“A plan,” Birgit echoed, nodding. “Good. I like plans. What are they?”

“Have a seat,” Frieda urged. “It gets a little intense for a while, but we think we have it figured out.”

In a low voice, Frieda explained the plan she and Regan finished during the drive back into town. Birgit was against it at first, stating it was too dangerous, but eventually changed her mind when Regan assured her how much help they were all going to have.

“You forget, it’s not just you and your sisters anymore,” Regan reminded Birgit. “You have nearly a dozen people ready to go to bat for you and help end this. Even without police help, we can do this. All we need is someone who’s not in cahoots with Anita and Jimmy to hear what they’re planning. And then, boom, we have witnesses.”

“But this could ruin our town.” Birgit sighed. “We used to be such a wonderful place.”

“If our town is ruined, it’s because of Anita and Jimmy, not us,” Frieda urged. “Besides, what are we supposed to do? Just let them take our hotel? Our livelihood? Who would they target next if we let them destroy us, B?”

“We can’t let the bullies win,” Heidi added gently, looking from Birgit to Frieda.

Birgit sighed, shook her head, and then shrugged.

“We can’t let bullies win,” she agreed, crossing her arms. “Okay. Explain it to me again.”

Chapter Five



“**R**egan.”

Regan had known where Jimmy was the moment he'd entered the office of Jansen Marten, but he still had to act surprised. The space was nestled in a five-story office building that was lined floor to roof with windows. Jansen's office was on the top two stories of the building, and the elegantly-designed reception room had a beautiful view of the mountainscape. When Regan came up on the elevator, he gave his name to the receptionist and quickly scanned the area, determining the likeliest place Jimmy or Jansen were going to appear from.

“Mr. Gall,” Regan greeted, standing up to shake Jimmy's hand. “Good to see you again.”

“You too, good sir,” Jimmy replied. Regan noted the man's body language and constitution. He was cordial, but not overly excited or emotional as he was the day before at *Sarabel's*. Instead, he was calm and collected and a man who gave off the aura that he could be trusted. He was a halfway decent con man, Regan gathered, but definitely not the best he'd ever dealt with.

“Apologies for being early,” Regan went on. “My father always told me that if I wanted to be on time, I needed to be fifteen minutes early. If I wanted to be late, I needed to arrive on time. And if I wanted to miss an opportunity, then I needed to show up late. This meeting, from what you told me yesterday could be very lucrative, and therefore I wanted to make sure I was on time.”

“Your father sounds like a smart man,” Jimmy replied, waving toward two seats.

“We’re not going in?” Regan asked, pretending to be surprised.

Jimmy let out an easy laugh as he sat down.

“Oh, we are,” he assured Regan. “And while I wish everyone had the same philosophy about time as you and your father, it’s unfortunately not the reality.” He paused, leaning in toward Regan to give him a serious look.

“This deal could be a really big thing and needs some additional players,” he explained. “Even if they have a habit of showing up late to meetings.”

“I see,” Regan replied, looking toward the door for Anita and Wendy. “So, who is it we are waiting for?”

A ghoulish grin spread over Jimmy’s face as he looked at Regan.

“Let me ask you something first,” Jimmy urged. “Just between you and me, guy to guy. If you were seeking financial advice to triple the worth of your portfolio, would you instinctively go to a man or a woman?”

Regan couldn’t give a damn about the gender of a financial advisor, especially a good one, but he knew the answer Jimmy wanted, and was ready to act like the perfect target.

“Guy to guy?” Regan asked, pretending to be insecure. Jimmy readily nodded back to him.

“Just between us,” he assured.

“A man,” Regan stated as if he felt guilty for his answer. “No disrespect to the opposite sex, but I would go with a man’s advice.”

“Exactly,” Jimmy agreed, slapping Regan’s knee as he grew more excited. “I’m the same way. I’ve never taken advice from a woman, and I’m better for it.” He paused, building effect.

This guy’s good, Regan thought.

“But, once in a lifetime, there comes along the exception to the rule,” Jimmy continued, his voice taking on a mystified tone. “And friend, that exception is Mrs. Anita Holstead. I swear, she has made me the man I am today and her earnings just keep skyrocketing. She started as a single business owner and now owns stakes in hotels in Denver, Aspen, Lake Tahoe, and several other resort-heavy businesses. And! She practically owns this entire town!”

“She sounds like quite an impressive woman,” Regan replied, knowing just what to say to keep Jimmy talking.

“She is,” Jimmy praised, “and she wants to share her success with others for her next venture. Anita has her sights set on *The Mystic Refuge* because it’s the last hotel in Leavenworth that isn’t owned by her company.”

“Yes, Frieda told me that,” Regan interjected truthfully. He shook his head as he frowned, feigning a moment of heartbroken weakness. Jimmy played into it quickly, putting a hand on Regan’s back to comfort him.

“And won’t this be a great way to get back at her?” Jimmy asked. “On top of making a pile of money, you’ll also be getting back at the woman who broke your heart. How could there be a sweeter deal than that?”

“It does sound pretty great,” Regan agreed, his stomach churning sickly. He hated guys like Jimmy, but they were so easy to play.

“But that’s what caused us to break up,” he continued. “All these strange things have been happening at her and her sisters’ hotel. I told her it wasn’t worth the aggravation and that they should just sell it and retire. I mean, they’re in their forties! Why would they want to run a hotel with what years they have left? Then she called me a chauvinist and broke up with me. So I don’t think they’ll be selling, even if it is what’s good for them.”

“Women.” Jimmy sighed emphatically, shaking his head. “So few know what they’re doing. That’s why they need a little help from time to time.”

Regan felt a stir of excitement, feeling close to Jimmy's first admission.

"What do you mean?" he asked, making sure to sound intrigued.

Jimmy finally looked back at him, an evil grin forming on his face.

"Just little hints to remind them how they're out of their depth."

Regan studied Jimmy's eyes, and watched as a sick pleasure seemed to unfold behind them. This man was twisted and highly egotistic. He had the markings of someone with extreme mental health issues. This was about more than just money for him. Taking away the hotel from the Strauss sisters was personal.

The door to the elevator dinged as it opened, and Regan watched Jimmy's evil expression shift into a pleasant and eager smile.

"That's Mrs. Holstead," he explained, slapping Regan's knee. "Come on, let's get this started."

* * *

"Oh my God, I think I'm going to be sick," Wendy warned, her hands going to her head. Regan looked over at her sympathetically from the driver's seat, and pulled out a box of tissues from the compartment between the two front seats of his truck.

"You did great," Regan assured her, handing her the box. "You didn't break character once."

Wendy took a tissue and dabbed at her warm forehead, then her lips, her free hand going to her stomach.

"They were so proud of their plan," she said in a dazed voice. "Of how much money it was going to make them. Of how much *joy* it was going to bring them. This is awful."

“But they confessed to at least some of the crimes, and that is what’s important,” Regan urged. “Plus, now we know what their plan is for tonight. We can put all our energy into the ceremony and get this out in the open. With luck, this all will end tonight.”

The plan had gone exceedingly well. Wendy and Regan had played their parts to perfection, even going so far as to sign an agreement for the project. Regan had warned Wendy that they might have to do this, so they each signed their name with small imperfections, just enough to void any contract. This resulted in Anita, Jimmy, and even Jansen, gloating over their little coup.

Wendy nodded as she took a steadying breath. Regan noticed some of her color return to her face, and was proud that she was able to shift perspectives.

“You’re right,” she agreed, giving an affirmative nod. “That’s what matters. Okay, let’s call a meeting, and get this plan into action.”

“Atta girl,” Regan praised, reaching for the call button on his truck’s touchscreen display. Frieda picked up after the first ring, asking immediately how it went.

“Perfect,” Regan replied, “but we need to all meet and talk before the pageant, and I know you need to be there in an hour. Anita and Jimmy mentioned they were going straight to the Chamber of Commerce office to start preparing for the pageant, so we should be free to meet at the hotel. Can you gather everybody?”

“Absolutely,” Frieda agreed. “We’ll meet in our presidential suite. Unfortunately, our guests just vacated it, but we’ll have privacy there. Room 425.”

“Be there in ten,” Regan told her, then hung up the phone.

Wendy and Regan drove the rest of the way to the hotel in silence. In the parking lot, they saw Erik pull in almost right after them. By the time they reached the hotel entrance, Pierce and Tucker had also pulled in. In the lobby, Cynthia and Lorrie were waiting for them, and they all took the elevator up to the

presidential suite, where Heidi, Davis, Birgit, Chris, and Frieda were waiting for them.

“Break it down for us,” Frieda asked, sparing any pleasantries. Regan gave her an appreciative glance.

“They want to take over the hotel,” Regan explained, “that’s confirmed. They also admitted to messing with you, which they referred to as ‘little doses of reality.’”

“Oh, I can’t wait to give them a ‘little dose of their reality,’” Frieda retorted, her voice biting.

“Trust me,” Regan assured her, “we will.”

“But what about tonight?” Birgit asked. “Do we know what’s going to happen?”

“They didn’t come right out and say it, but we think they’re going to try to do something ‘mortifying’ to you,” Wendy explained. “Which is why we’re going to have our little security team here have their eyes on you the entire time.”

“No, that’s too dangerous,” Heidi insisted, shaking her head. “These two are obviously crazy, and I can’t trust they’ll stop at just embarrassment or shame. I’m not letting my sister get physically hurt.”

“You think I would let that happen?” Davis asked her. He was standing behind her, and had gripped her shoulders carefully as he leaned forward to look at her. “Absolutely not. None of us will.”

“The ceremony is a public event,” Regan explained. “Which means we can have recording devices. We need to get them talking about Birgit and their plans and that’ll be easier if Birgit is right in front of them. These two are getting too excited about their success, and they’re going to slip up. We need to be there when they do, which is another reason why it’s important we *all* be there. We’ve done a good job hiding that Wendy and I are your friends, so they don’t think of us as the enemy anymore. We can all be in one place without any suspicion. And the more of us there, the more opportunity we have of getting a taped confession.”

“He’s right, Heidi,” Frieda agreed, reaching out to grab her little sister’s hand.

Heidi nodded in acceptance, then drew her posture up straight. “I can deal with that,” she replied. “Okay, give us the details. What do we do now?”

Chapter Six



Frieda pulled the slipper zipper up the back of her sister's dark red dress, then gently swept her fingers over Birgit's shoulders, smoothing the already perfectly-laid fabric.

"You look absolutely beautiful," she praised, tilting to the side just enough so that she could peek around Birgit at their reflection in the mirror. Her older sister smiled brightly, and she placed her hand over Frieda's on her shoulder.

"Heidi and Wendy did an amazing job with my makeup," Birgit replied with a nervous laugh.

"Well, they didn't have to do much," Frieda teased. But it was true. They had worked a great trick with black eyeliner and the perfect shade of red lipstick, but aside from that, it was Birgit's natural beauty that made her so stunning.

"It's been too long since I've seen you dressed up like this," Frieda continued. "You should find reasons to dress up more often."

Birgit let out a laugh as she shook her head, and turned to Frieda.

"How about *you* getting dressed up more often?" she teased. "I've never seen you in formal wear except for my wedding."

"And unless Heidi gets married again, this is the *last* time you'll see me in formal wear." Frieda laughed. "No, honey. This is more you than me. You look radiant. And you're going to *be* radiant. I read your speech and I think it's perfect."

Birgit let out a tired laugh. “The whole thing just seems silly now. After everything we’ve been through, what’s it going to matter? It’s not going to fix anything. This isn’t for grant money or donations. It’s just an award.”

“It’s important because, *despite* everything we’ve been through, we still matter,” Frieda replied emphatically.

“Not if we go bankrupt,” Birgit replied, looking stressed again.

Frieda put a calming hand on Birgit’s shoulder and gently pushed her into a chair.

“We’re not going to go bankrupt,” she soothed. “We’re not making a profit yet, but we still have some money left from the great-aunts’ inheritance. We will make it. And next year, when this is all over, we will be better than ever.”

Birgit nodded, then gave Frieda a soft smile as she met her eyes. “You’re right. I keep thinking that this is going to be a never-ending thing, but it won’t be. It ends tonight.”

“Yes, it does,” Frieda agreed, her tone absolute. “Remember what our great-aunts taught us. No one messes with the Strauss sisters and gets away with it.”

“Right.” Birgit laughed. “Aunties Ursula and Helga would never let anyone take the hotel from them, so why should we?”

“Exactly,” Frieda praised, relieved that her sister was feeling better. Just then a knock came at Birgit’s door. Birgit replied that it was open, and a moment later, Chris walked in, looking classy in his black suit and crisp white-collared shirt.

“Look at this handsome fella right here,” Frieda praised, smiling at Chris.

“Birgit you look incredible,” Chris breathed, his eyes sweeping down her figure. He then looked over at Frieda and smiled. “Thanks, Frieda. Black suits you well.”

Frieda glanced down at her outfit for the evening. It was by no means dressy, but the black, fitted long sleeve shirt and trousers fit her well. After Heidi’s insistence, Frieda did allow

her to pin a ruby and emerald broach to her blouse to commemorate the festive event.

“I’m just happy I’m not the one in the spotlight tonight,” Frieda replied, heading for the door. “I’ll give you two some privacy, but then we should really head over to the ceremony. We only have a small window to pull this job off.”

“We’ll be out soon,” Birgit promised.

Frieda left Birgit’s quarters and followed the hallway out into the lobby, where the rest of her friends were dressed and waiting. Heidi was in an ice blue satin dress with a matching shawl, and Lorrie had chosen a pink long-sleeved gown with a sweetheart cutout. Wendy, like Frieda, had opted for black, and Cynthia was wearing dark purple. All of the men, including Regan were in classic black suits.

“Well, don’t we look like movie stars,” Frieda teased lightly as they all turned toward her. “Everyone looks so great!”

“It’s the event of the year,” Heidi sang.

“In more ways than one,” Regan said dryly, making Frieda chuckle. He turned his eyes toward Frieda and gave her a warm smile.

“You look great, too, Frieda,” he told her. “You wear black very well.”

“You don’t look too bad yourself, Regan,” she replied, mentally trying to stop her cheeks from blushing.

A moment later Chris and Birgit came into the lobby, and everyone gasped and praised Birgit’s dress.

“Thanks, everyone,” Birgit replied, smiling wide as she looked at each of them. “Well, shall we go do this thing?”

They all agreed, and as one, moved into motion. Chris would be escorting Birgit to the ceremony alone, as would Regan and Wendy. Everyone else was to carpool together and arrive before the four of them did to take their positions at the venue. Regan and Wendy would then arrive separately so that they could be greeted by Jimmy and Anita. And then, finally,

Birgit and Chris would arrive; that way, Birgit had someone watching over her the moment she got there.

The moment they reached the venue, they split up. Though they were early, plenty of people had already started to arrive. Despite the crowd, though, Frieda spotted Anita and Frank as soon as she walked into the banquet room. Anita, of course, was dressed in an elaborate white, sparkling gown, and Frank was dressed in a very expensive tuxedo. Jimmy was nowhere to be found, but that didn't exactly surprise her. She knew he was there somewhere, just waiting for Anita's signal.

As if Regan was reading her thoughts, Frieda's phone suddenly vibrated.

Jimmy greeted me at the door; he's with me behind the stage with Birgit and the other speech givers. Move to second position.

Anxiety laced through Frieda as she got the text and began making her way slowly through the Anita sycophant crowd to get backstage. It annoyed her how incredibly out-of-touch everyone around her seemed to be, and she wondered if they'd known just an iota of what she knew if they would still be there supporting Miss Perfect.

Well, they're certainly going to find out today, she thought, gently pushing her way through. As she made her way, she spotted Tucker and Pierce subtly standing guard around Birgit and Chris. Pierce was pretending to speak with a server while Tucker was making polite conversation with Milly Thomas, the owner of *Cats & Cocoa Café*. Every few seconds or so, Frieda noticed them each look furtively toward Birgit, making sure she was still safe.

Jimmy and Regan were standing together in a corner not far off, seemingly talking. Frieda took in Jimmy's stance and could tell he was agitated over something. His eyes kept shifting over to Birgit as if wanting to be sure he knew exactly where she was.

"Frieda. I thought I saw you coming back here."

Frieda turned around as she heard Anita's voice, swallowing the loathing she felt rising in her. Knowing she needed to play her part, she pulled on a pleasant smile.

"Hi, Anita," she greeted coolly. "Yes, I wanted to come and wish my sister luck before the ceremony starts."

"That's so nice of you," Anita replied sweetly, her tone immediately irritating Frieda. "I really hope that tonight goes well for her. I know the three of you have been struggling with some problems lately, but I think it's so great you didn't give up. It just proves how strong you all really are."

"We are Strausses," Frieda acknowledged. "We're born that way. Nothing will knock us down."

"Hmmm," Anita hummed, still smiling sweetly at Frieda. "Well, how lovely for you. I'm sure you're going to need it."

In her pocket, Frieda pushed the record button on her phone.

"Why's that, Anita?" she asked.

Anita gave her a pitying look, and then nodded toward where Regan and Jimmy were standing.

"I didn't mean to be nosy, but I was there at *Sarabel's* when you went through your breakup with that man over there. It sounded pretty harsh," she went on with a frown that almost looked more like a smile. Anita then reached out and patted Frieda's shoulder.

"But like you said, you're strong. I'm sure you'll find a way to bounce back from the heartbreak of it all."

Frieda grinned icily, wanting revenge now more than ever.

"I'm sure I will," she replied, mimicking Anita's tone. "But I'm not here for him, I'm here for my sister. She's worked so hard to bring success to our hotel. I have no doubt that her speech will garner a lot of positive attention from both the state and local representatives."

Anita's eyes glittered challengingly back at Frieda, and a strange, almost creepy smile spread across her face.

“We shall see, won’t we?” she asked, her perfect brow arching. “Well, I must be off to give a few remarks to everyone before we get started. It was great talking to you, Frieda. Best of luck to your sister tonight.”

“I’ll tell her you said so,” Frieda replied, doing her best to sound sincere. They nodded to one another, then Anita walked away as Frieda turned around. Frieda paused and turned again, stopping in time to see Anita approach Jimmy and Regan. From the back, she could see a small mic box attached to the lower part of her gown, with a wire connecting up to a mic in her ear.

Suddenly, Frieda remembered the pamphlet she was handed earlier, and pulled it quickly out of her purse. In the list of events, Anita had been named as the emcee, which meant that the mic was connected to the room’s speakers. Frieda looked back up, just catching the tail of the trio walking off behind a secondary curtain. Realizing the opportunity they’d just been granted, Frieda pulled out her phone, and quickly texted Regan.

She’s hooked to a mic. Turn the little dial on the box on the back of her dress.

The moment the text message was sent, she turned around and hurried toward the sound room. Davis, Tucker, Pierce, and Erik all looked at her curiously but stood down when she shook her head at them. All she had to do was turn Anita’s mic on and their conversation would be broadcasted throughout the entire room.

“Frank,” she exclaimed, nearly having a heart attack when she flung open the door and found him inside.

Frank jumped as he looked at her wildly.

“Goodness, Frieda, are you alright?” he asked, reaching out a hand to her.

“I need to turn Anita’s mic on,” she said, trying to catch her breath. “Sound check.”

Frank gave her a confused look.

“She had her sound check thirty minutes ago, and it went fine. We don’t start for another fifteen minutes.”

Knowing she might only have seconds left for her idea to even possibly work, Frieda decided to hit Frank with the truth.

“Frank, I know what’s going on,” she stated, her voice low but firm. “I know what your wife has been up to and what she’s maybe forced you to do. But we can stop her right now. Let me turn the mic on. What she’s talking about now can prove what she’s done, and put an end to it all.”

Frieda was not normally an emotional person, but the look of sorrow that shattered Frank’s expression nearly broke her heart. He had the look of a man mortally wounded, and had no idea how to accept his fate.

“I loved her,” he whispered, tears forming in his eyes. “But I don’t want to do this anymore. I’m not a bad person.”

“I know you’re not,” Frieda replied quickly, taking a step toward him. “We all know that, Frank. Please. Let me do this.”

Frank looked back up at her, slowly shaking his head. Then, with a sigh, he brought his hand down to one of the many black switches and flipped it up. Frieda let out an audible sigh of relief as a muffled sound suddenly came through the speakers of the room, and then quickly checked her phone. A single text message with the word *done* had been sent from Regan.

“It’s just cold feet,” Anita’s voice whispered loudly through the speakers. Through the glass, Frieda watched as the crowd of people outside of it suddenly grew quiet and turned toward the speakers.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone.” Regan’s voice could be heard next.

“You’re not hurting her,” Anita whispered back in a placating voice. “You’re just sending a message that it’s time

for her to go.”

From the crowd, Frieda started seeing people’s mouths begin to drop as they continued to listen silently.

“Birgit is a good person. I changed my mind. I don’t want to help.” Regan spoke.

This time as Anita responded, her voice was not sweet or calm, but gritting and demanding.

“If Birgit and her sisters don’t pull out, then we all lose out on this much-needed investment,” she hissed. “What do you think I’ve done all of this for? The hot chocolate? The vandalized painting and pools? The bear?”

Suddenly Jimmy’s voice cut off Anita’s.

“Don’t forget the fire,” he pointed out.

“That was an accident!” Anita hissed back at him. “You were the one who was supposed to put the candles out! You almost got us caught!”

Anita’s voice suddenly grew so loud and sharp that caused a low whining to come from the speakers, and then they all heard a soft gasp.

“Oh my God,” Frieda murmured as her sisters and friends all slowly turned toward her. “I did it. We did it.”

“Is your mic on?” Jimmy asked, his voice quivering.

“No,” Anita breathed, followed by the sound of her gathering fabric. “No, no, no, no.”

Frieda watched as two security guards came walking up to the curtain that Anita, Jimmy, and Regan were behind, and pulled it open. The look of horror that was frozen on Anita’s face as she turned toward everyone made Frieda feel a little bad for her. Jimmy wasn’t too far off, looking like a deer caught in the headlights of a big rig truck, and there wasn’t even one thought of moving. Regan was the only one that didn’t look stricken with fear, and eagerly put his hands up before he was asked.

Chapter Seven



“**H**ow are you feeling Frank?”

It was nearly three hours later, and Frank, along with Frieda and their group, had remained at the venue while police began to sort things out. Shouting between Jimmy and Anita broke out shortly after the security guards found them hiding with Regan behind the curtain. Anita swore that she was an innocent victim and began pushing Jimmy away from her, to which he responded that the plan was all her idea and that he had trusted her with everything they had. At one point, Anita lunged for Jimmy, but was stopped by Regan, and it was only then that they moved in to arrest them.

Officers Normandy and Dawson, who had refused to help Frieda and her sisters with the case in the beginning, suddenly acted as if they were the heroes when they stormed the stage with handcuffs. Immediately, Anita demanded to know what they were doing and publicly outed them to be on her payroll when they came at her with handcuffs. The two officers were able to play it cool until the state troopers arrived, but then they were arrested as well.

Frank turned wearily toward Frieda, the two of them sitting in a row of chairs at the back of the room. He was a handsome older man, but now he just looked withered, thin, and hopeless.

“I’m going to go to jail.” He sighed tiredly.

Frieda gave him a compassionate look, and reached out to rub his back.

“Just tell them the truth,” she urged softly. “You may not.”

Frank looked away from her and shook his head.

“I deserve to go, though,” he replied. “Even if I don’t want to go, I know I deserve it. You can’t just be a witness to evil things being done and not get punished for it. What’s that saying?”

“The world is a dangerous place,” Frieda answered, quoting Albert Einstein, “not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing.”

Frank nodded his head. “That one. I may not have helped them with what they were doing, but if I would have just been strong enough to speak up at any time...If I would have somehow gotten Anita to accept that we were broke—”

“Frank, wait,” Frieda urged, immediately hung up on what he’d just said. “What do you mean you’re broke? You own half the town!”

“*Used* to own half the town,” Frank explained. “We started having financial troubles a couple of years ago. We would have been okay then if Anita could have lived with just a little less for a year or two. But she couldn’t. In fact, she started spending even more, going out more, and shirking her responsibilities in both the businesses and the town. I tried to give her her space, thinking that she would mellow herself out.”

Frank sighed and shook his head.

“Then, one night a few months ago, she didn’t come home. I was worried about her, so I went looking for her and found her with Jimmy.”

“Oh, Frank, that must have been awful,” Frieda breathed, her heart going out to him. She knew from personal experience just how badly catching someone cheating could hurt, and it was a pain not easily forgotten.

“It was,” Frank agreed, “but,” he shook his head, as if trying to make sense of it now, “for some reason when she started explaining things to me, I accepted it. She said Jimmy was a useful key and nothing more and that the two of them

had a plan to help us both get out of financial trouble. Somewhere in my head, I knew they were wrong and that what I had walked into was way more than just a meeting of ends, but I think I so desperately wanted things to get better that I accepted what she was saying.”

“So, Anita and Jimmy’s plan was to harass us until we sold and then buy us out,” Frieda said aloud, “and then use our profits to dig her way out of debt? That doesn’t make sense. Our hotel, even when in perfect condition, only makes a third of what just one of your hotels does.”

“It’s not the hotel she wants, it’s the land,” Frank explained. “Jimmy said that there’s something special about the land, and that selling the rights would bring in huge cash.”

“So that’s why Jimmy suddenly fought so hard for *The Mystic Refuge* in the divorce,” Frieda murmured. “What’s so special about it?”

Before Frank could answer, two officers appeared and told Frank it was time to come with them. As he stood up, Frieda noticed for the first time that his hunched over posture had been hiding the handcuffs that were keeping his hands in front of him. She gave him a compassionate look as she stood up as well, and let the officers take him.

“Take care of yourselves, Frieda,” Frank urged as he was walked away. “You girls did good.”

Though he still looked completely destroyed, Frank turned to give her a small smile. Though she didn’t quite feel like smiling, Frieda must one up to give to him, and then turned to find the rest of her group. They had all been taken aside at one point or another to be interviewed, and Frieda had been the first one done. After walking around the venue a little bit, she found Birgit and the others waiting for her outside.

“There you are,” Birgit gasped, rushing to hug Frieda. “Where have you been?”

“Talking with Frank,” Frieda replied, hugging her sister back tightly. Quickly the two of them were joined by Heidi, and then the others until they were in one big hug.

“How is he?” Heidi asked afterward.

Frieda shrugged. “He’s going to be in misery for a while, with or without jail time. He feels really guilty for not reporting Jimmy and Anita sooner. I told him we didn’t blame him, but I don’t think he heard me.”

“A man’s guilt can often be worse than any physical prison,” Davis stated. Then around him Pierce, Tucker, Chris, and Erik nodded.

“Where’s Regan?” Frieda asked, realizing he wasn’t with them.

“He was taken to the police station with Anita, Jimmy, and Jansen,” Erik replied calmly. “He’s going to be fine, and we have plenty of evidence to prove that he was never really on their side. He’ll probably be released within the next twenty-four hours or so.”

Erik then clapped Frieda on the back and gave her a look of gratitude. “You know, that was a nice little last-minute plan you had there,” he praised.

“No kidding,” Birgit agreed, “I really didn’t want to find out what it was they planned on doing to me to ruin my speech.”

Frieda felt a swell of pride rising within her as her sisters and friends congratulated her on her quick thinking. She was thankful she had gone with her gut on the last-minute plan and that all of the harassment was finally drawing to an end.

“Speaking of,” Frieda replied, “I’m really sorry you didn’t get to give your speech. You worked so hard on it!”

Birgit shrugged, and the entire group slowly made their way to the vehicles. “I think the ceremony got cancelled for a pretty valid reason, though,” she quipped, throwing an arm around Frieda’s shoulders. Frieda rolled her eyes at her sister, smiling.

“You know what I was thinking about?” Birgit asked as they continued to walk.

“What’s that?” Frieda asked, wrapping an arm around Birgit’s waist.

“That we should have listened to you about participating in these contests,” Birgit replied matter-of-factly.

“Oh!” Frieda laughed. “*Now* you want to listen to me, huh?”

“Yes, I do,” Birgit replied, giving Frieda a squeeze. “In fact, I think we’ll take this next year off from town contests and just focus on repairing our hotel.”

“I think that’s a fantastic idea,” Heidi perked up, joining them by butting into the middle. “Besides, we may have very different things to focus on for this next year.”

Frieda followed her youngest sister’s gaze toward Davis and Chris, who were chatting with one another by Regan’s truck. Seeing the Jeep Gladiator made a strange feeling rise from Frieda’s stomach, and she suddenly wanted to drive to the station to check on Regan, even though she knew he was going to be fine. She also knew that Erik had his keys, and that they all had rides home.

“Maybe Heidi’s right,” Frieda mused, thinking about her future as she looked at the truck. “Maybe we will have different things to focus on.”

At her side, Frieda heard Wendy whisper, “She means different *people* to focus on,” which was followed quickly by soft laughter from her sisters, Cynthia, and Lorrie. She gave them an amused look, and then as one, as if all thinking the same thing, converged into a group hug.

“We hate to break up the love fest,” Pierce called, smiling from ear to ear, “but it’s freezing outside and we want to get someplace warm.”

“Let’s go to the hotel,” Birgit urged, heading toward Chris and his truck. “It’s time to celebrate.”

Chapter Eight



One month later

Fifty-four-year-old Leavenworth businesswoman Anita J. Holstead and her forty-nine-year-old partner James H. Gall, former Mayor of Leavenworth, have pleaded guilty to over thirty counts of felony harassment and vandalism at their arraignment last Friday, January 23. Holstead and Gall are facing these charges after a month-long string of domestic terrorist attacks they inflicted on another local hotel, The Mystic Refuge (TMR).

TMR is owned by local sisters Birgit, Frieda, and Heidi Strauss. While none of the Strauss sisters offered to comment, police reports indicate that...

“**A**nything good in there?”

Frieda looked up from the front page of *The Leavenworth Journal*, smiling as she heard Regan’s voice. She folded the paper and tossed it on the coffee table, sitting in front of her in the lobby, and then leaned back into the plush couch.

“Nothing we don’t already know,” Frieda replied.

Regan chuckled as he took a seat beside her, his eyes glancing down at the paper before returning to her.

“So, how does it feel to be done with all of that?” he asked. “Stress-free, I hope.”

Frieda rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“I wish.” She sighed. “But after the story broke out, we’ve been busier than ever. Resort investors have come out from all over in hopes of owning stock in the hotel, and our booking system has been swamped with reservations even though the pools haven’t been fixed yet.”

“I heard there was even talk of a movie script being passed around?” Regan asked, nudging Frieda’s knee with his own.

“Yeah.” Frieda laughed, rolling her eyes. “Could you imagine? But Birgit, Heidi, and I quickly shut that down. We just want to get back to normal, you know? We barely got this place up and running before the drama started, and we just want the opportunity to figure out where to go from here.”

“Well, personally, I think that’s a wise decision,” Regan replied. “Besides, I have no idea who I would pick to play me in a movie. What do you think? Liam Neeson?”

Frieda giggled, happy that Regan didn’t just disappear back into the woods after Anita and Jimmy were arrested. Instead, after he was released from police custody, he began visiting a few times a week. He’d always say hi to Birgit, Heidi, Lorrie, and Cynthia, but then he would come to wherever Frieda was working—usually in the kitchen—and visit with her for a few hours.

“Definitely Liam Neeson,” she agreed. “What about me?”

Regan made a show of looking at Frieda’s face this way and that, moving his fingers up to make a square around her face.

“I’m thinking a young Elizabeth Taylor,” he replied.

“Well, great,” she joked. “All we need is a time machine and then maybe we can give this movie thing a go.”

“Darn, mine broke,” Regan replied, slapping his knee.

Frieda sighed and shook her head, going along with the bit.

“That’s a shame. The movie really could have been something,” she replied, grinning.

“Hey, you two,” Pierce greeted, joining them in the lobby. “What’s the word?”

Frieda picked up the paper and tossed it into Pierce’s lap as he sat down.

“Oh, yeah.” He chuckled, picking it up. “I saw this. It was weird seeing my name in the paper, but I thought they described my valiant efforts quite well.”

“Yes, they really made you out to be the hero you are,” Frieda replied sarcastically.

“Hey, I think all of us deserve that title, don’t you, babe?” Davis asked, walking up with Heidi.

“Well, especially Pierce,” she teased. “He’s the one that got the bear out of here.”

Davis suddenly pressed his hand to his chest, looking hurt. “But I’m the one that called him.”

“Yes.” Lorrie laughed as she joined them, taking a seat in Pierce’s lap. “And you will forever be commemorated as the guy with the right phone number at the right time.”

“Well, I see where my heroism gets me,” Davis retorted, feigning offense. “Next time you’re dealing with a wild bear, you’ll all be on your own.”

“Now, now, honey, don’t be sour,” Heidi teased, patting his shoulder. “You were the one that got the fire out, and that was important, too.”

“Yes, we can’t forget about the fire,” Birgit agreed, joining the group with Chris by her side.

“Finally, the recognition I deserve,” Davis sighed dramatically.

“Oh, is that the paper?” Wendy asked, Erik and her joining them next. “Does it say anything about Frank?”

Frieda’s smile slipped a little as she shook her head.

“Not much in terms of sentencing, but I went to visit him yesterday,” she explained. “Looks like his mental health evaluation came back less than stellar. He has to stay at a psychiatric facility a little longer. His lawyers are optimistic, though. He said they hope to have him out and back at home by the end of the year.”

“What’s home going to even look like for him?” Cynthia wondered aloud, shaking her head. “Didn’t the feds seize all of the Holstead properties?”

Birgit nodded.

“They did indeed,” she answered. “It’s one of the reasons we’ve been drowning in reservations. We’re one of the very few hotels in the area that wasn’t owned by the Holstead Group. Everything else is shut down.”

“Well, that should at least help us corner the market for a while, maybe even make up for some of our losses,” Heidi acknowledged.

“It’s already happening,” Birgit reported happily. “In fact, starting tomorrow, we can start looking for two more employees.”

“That should be very easy to do now that the majority of the town’s hotel management staff is no longer employed,” Chris stated, giving Birgit a small smile as he looked down at her.

“I just love going through interviews,” Birgit squealed happily.

“What about you, Wendy?” Frieda asked, turning the conversation to the woman who had so selflessly helped them catch Anita and Jimmy.

“What is life like post spy game?”

Wendy smiled as she leaned in toward Erik, who immediately kissed the top of her head as she did so.

“Well, I can definitely say that I’m not going to spy school,” she joked, which everyone politely laughed at.

“But I did become interested in some of the stuff Anita and Jensen were talking to me about. Of course, I’m going to look for a different set of financial advisors, but I am interested in finding out what exactly I can do with my inheritance money. Maybe if I found some investors and pitched a good idea, I could get a free clinic opened around here.”

“I would be interested in something like that,” Erik spoke up, looking at Wendy with adoration.

“Me too,” Regan agreed. “Let’s set something up soon and talk.”

“You guys don’t have to do that,” Wendy assured them. “That’s not why I brought it up.”

“No, but it is a good idea, Wendy,” Erik replied, looking at her with a warm smile. Besides, this place has enough stores and hotels. This place needs something more meaningful than that.”

“Wait a minute,” Frieda interjected. “I thought all that stuff about you being rich was fake? I thought you were just playing a part to reel Jimmy into our trap.”

Regan looked at her with a cheeky grin.

“I am a man of mystery,” he replied with a shrug. Then his eyes darkened, and a different, more personal look took over his teasing expression.

“But if you would maybe agree to let me take you out to dinner, I could share some of my secrets with you.”

Frieda felt the stirring of butterflies as Regan’s voice dipped from sarcastic to sincere, and she couldn’t help the girlish smile that spread across her lips. Regan had no reason to help her or her family, and yet he’d gone so far as to get arrested for the sake of saving them from Anita and Jimmy. As Erik had promised, Regan had been released from police custody and absolved of any wrong-doing within twenty-four hours of the bust. He could have walked away then, gone back to the woods and the solitary life he’d become so comfortable with, and never come out again.

Instead, though, his visits to the hotel—and especially Frieda had been steady. He was never pushy or overwhelming like many of Frieda’s suitors had been in the past, but instead, he was calm and poised. He didn’t get offended by her jokes or her way of doing things either, but instead got on board and actually helped her when she needed it. It was new and strange. But it was also very, *very* good.

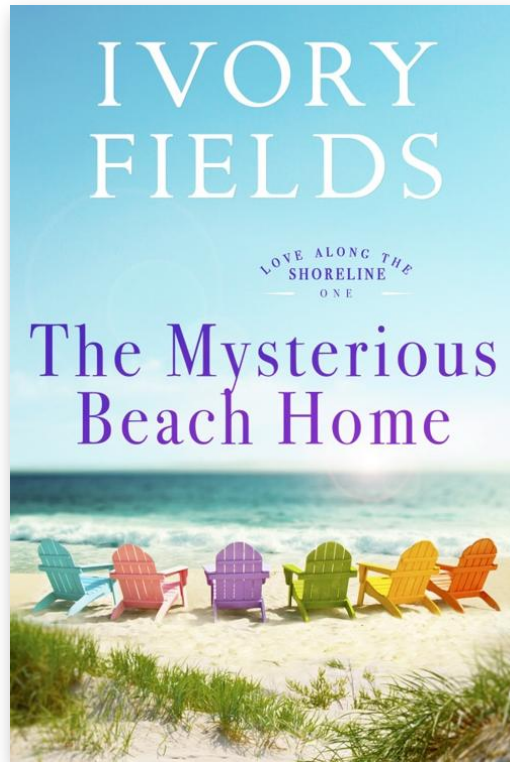
“If you share some of yours, I’ll share some of mine,” she told him, wrapping her fingers around his hand as he slipped it into her open palm.

Regan smiled back at her, moving closer.

“Consider it done.”

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